

## Promoting Philanthropy? News Publicity and Voluntary Organizations in Canada

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*This paper reports exploratory data from a broader study that examines media representations of the voluntary sector in Canada. It specifically identifies the resources and organizational attributes of Canadian voluntary groups that appear to be important for receiving mainstream news coverage. The data identifies four sets of characteristics of more than 500 voluntary organizations: demographic variables, association type, noneconomic resources, and economic expenditures. These characteristics are examined in terms of their relationship to news coverage. The data suggest that area of activity is significantly related to the amount of media attention that organizations receive. However, the amount of media attention that an organization receives is most strongly influenced by its yearly budget. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to both current debates about advocacy in the voluntary sector and important contextual developments that are transforming the communication environment in which charities and nonprofit organizations in Canada operate. We also draw comparisons to news coverage of the voluntary sector in other liberal democratic countries.*

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**KEY WORDS:** voluntary sector; news media; Canada; public policy; quantitative methods.

### INTRODUCTION

In Canada, as in other industrialized nations, pressure from within and beyond government to reduce spending and redefine the role and responsibilities of the state has created the conditions for growth in the voluntary sector. With government assuming more of a facilitator than provider role, responsibility for

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social redistribution and cohesion is moving increasingly into the realm of service markets that are occupied by charities and nonprofits (Teeple, 1995, pp. 107–109). The relationship between changing policy priorities, a shifting political-economic terrain, and growing expectations that voluntary organizations will be willing and able to fill the void left by the state's retreat has thus precipitated significant revenue, organizational, and service-delivery challenges for these organizations.

These "current realities" have led members and constituencies of voluntary groups, along with activists and scholars, to call for a better-defined statutory–voluntary sector relationship and a more affirmative public policy advocacy role for charities and nonprofits. Phillips (2001) argues that the institutional model currently governing state–voluntary sector relations in Canada is in need of greater elasticity if it is to create the collaborative policy environment that modern decentralized systems of governance require. Similarly, Drache and Boyle (1998), Webb (2000, 2003), and the Institute for Media, Policy, and Civil Society (IMPACS, 2002), point to problems in Canadian tax laws that not only fail to acknowledge the changing nature of governmental responsibility and charitable activity, but which also constrains certain voluntary groups from campaigning for significant improvements in public policy. At the state level, the creation of a Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI) by the federal government in 2000 was a first step toward enabling the sector to contribute to policy development and change in a more meaningful way.

Notwithstanding the advancements these studies and new directions in public administration represent, we argue that more attention and consideration ought to be paid to investigating the voluntary sector's communication activities. It is something of a truism that good communication is a key ingredient for success in the voluntary sector. Whether we are referring to appeals for funds or volunteers, of influencing perceptions and attitudes toward particular causes, or encouraging charitable giving and voluntarism more generally, the sector's contact with the public is almost always channelled through the myriad forms of mass media (Fenton *et al.*, 1993, p. 58). Indeed, we would argue that contemporary society is unthinkable without considering the overwhelming presence of mass media in everyday social, economic, and political life. But there is good reason to argue that attention to the communications function has become more important to how voluntary organizations relate with their constituencies, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Faced with a declining membership base, dramatic reductions in government funding, demands for operational transparency and fiscal accountability, and increased pressure to be at the forefront of problem-solving, social innovation, and civic engagement, many Canadian voluntary organizations (and those in other countries), recognizing the vital role mass media and communication play in the furtherance of their aims, have become more promotionally savvy, strategically oriented, and media-focused (e.g., Zimmerman and Dart, 1998).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Deacon *et al.* (1995) rightly argue that communication about the voluntary sector works on various levels. Informally, it operates through the interaction of individuals in everyday life, in casual and

Given this expanded role and importance of communication and mass media for voluntary organizations it is therefore somewhat surprising that there exists so little research in this area. Our hope is that this paper will go part of the way in filling this void, and that it may initiate dialogue among scholars and analysts, voluntary groups, policymakers, and media professionals about the role and impact of news media and strategic communication on building capacity and encouraging new forms of innovation and entrepreneurship within Canada's voluntary sector. We focus in this paper upon news reportage of the sector in particular, and provide some exploratory data that identifies which resources and organizational attributes appear to be important for receiving the attention of mainstream news media. While far from conclusive, our findings suggest the importance of two organizational variables to media attention, the general area of advocacy and service delivery (e.g. social justice) and, to a much greater extent, the size of an organization's budget. These are critical findings in light of broader structural changes within the global and domestic media systems that pose considerable challenges to voluntary organizations that wish to communicate their views and values broadly. If the news media are one of the most powerful institutional forces in Canadian society—the shapers of opinion, setters of debate, and a central arena for informing how we view our communities and the world around us—then the question of who will have access and whose voices will be heard becomes important for assessing the quality of public participation in policy processes.

## STATE RESTRUCTURING AND A GROWING VOLUNTARY SECTOR

In many capitalist countries the voluntary sector has grown in social and political importance as all levels of government retrench state responsibilities for welfare provision. In Canada, drastic cutbacks in core funding of voluntary organizations and other public interest groups were initiated by the federal Conservative government in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and were accelerated throughout the first term of the subsequent Liberal administration (1993–97). For example, as illustrated by Jenson and Phillips (1996), the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSOW), established to foster the political capacity and organization of women and to advise (and sometimes criticize) the Minister responsible for the Status of Women on issues pertaining to women's citizenship rights, was reorganized in the early 1990s and in 1994 its role in advising the government on policy “contracted out” to private research firms whom the government felt were “more appropriate sources of advice as well as recipients of state monies” (p. 121). In 1995, funding for the National Voluntary Organization (NVO) was slashed by

word-of-mouth exchange and conversation. But it also operates in a more structured manner, through formal networks, such as in publicity activities that are intentionally designed to convey information and engage a wider audience. For our purposes in this study, we focus on the latter form of communication.

50%, multicultural organizations faced 24% cuts, and overseas development and welfare groups subsidized under the National Welfare grants program each faced 15% funding reductions (Marquardt, 1995).<sup>5</sup> According to Phillips, “the motivation behind these cuts was partly financial . . . but it was also premised on the twin beliefs that such organizations should succeed or fail in the ‘marketplace’ of ideas and funding, and that the state should not support groups that criticize its policies” (Phillips, 2001, p. 185). Similar to the case of Britain, the introduction of this restructuring project followed a decades-long affirmative policy framework in which the government invested directly in the voluntary sector not only to promote well-being and ensure social security, but also to help build a collective national identity that was seen to be central to the state’s broader post-war governmental and citizenship agendas (Jenson and Phillips, 1996).

Not surprisingly, this process of state retrenchment has been accompanied by a coincidental expansion in the size and scope of the voluntary sector. According to the recent *National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations (NSNVO)*, the first comprehensive study of the non-profit/voluntary sector in Canada, just more than 160,000 non-profit and voluntary organizations were operating across Canada in 2003.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 80,000 of these organizations are registered with the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) as charities. Dreesen’s (2000) study of the sector reported similar data on the number of charities, and indicated that as many as half of these organizations had come into existence following the mid-1980s (14). While all of these figures surely underestimate the actual number of groups that perform charitable and not-for-profit services, they do provide a snapshot of how the sector has grown during a period of considerable state reorganization.

This combined increase in the sector’s presence and responsibility has placed numerous pressures and uncertainties onto voluntary groups that have resulted in a more competitive environment, in which charities and nonprofits find themselves “having to compete for a shifting and shrinking pool of resources” (Deacon, 1996, p. 181). This context of uncertainty is further exacerbated by institutional constraints on voluntary organizations and, specifically, registered charities, which limits their participation in policy debate. In contrast to Australia, for example, where nonprofit (tax-exempt) organizations are encouraged to use the lobby and media systems to advance their goals and interests,<sup>7</sup> charities in Canada are

<sup>5</sup>Importantly, this restructuring very clearly indicated the new objective of government to fund service-providers rather than policy advocates, as most of those organizations affected by these changes were advocacy groups (Jenson and Phillips, 1996).

<sup>6</sup>The executive summary and full report of the NSNVO are available from the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy’s website (<http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/research/CCP.asp?page=NSNVO#section?>).

<sup>7</sup>In Australia, charities are permitted to advance their causes with greater latitude than is currently the case in Canada. A report by IMPACS (2000, p. 19) shows that in a process of reviewing and modernizing its charitable tax laws, the Inquiry Committee (appointed by the Australian government in 2000) considered the Canadian 10% rule but adopted a more liberal approach that recommended charities be permitted to engage in advocacy provided they do so without partisan purposes and so long as their organizational trajectory be primarily charitable. For example, if a charity determines

forbidden from using more than 10% of their financial resources for what the CRA defines as explicitly “political” activity.<sup>8</sup> Supporters of the current limitation on advocacy argue that loosening regulations on spending will transform charities from service providers into full-time lobbyists; that increased advocacy by charities will infringe upon the role of democratically elected members of parliament; and that greater latitude for advocacy will reduce government revenues. Critics counter that the legislation is not only unduly restrictive but also outdated, i.e., it suffers from a lack of clarity and fails to reflect overwhelming public support for the advocacy activities of charities and nonprofit groups (IMPACS, 2002; Muttart Foundation, 2000). However the cloth is cut, it would appear that “while Canadian governments have little difficulty accepting the value of the voluntary sector in community building, citizenship training, and service delivery, they still struggle with its political role as representative and advocate” (Phillips, 2001, p. 199).

## MEDIA PUBLICITY AND THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

To be an effective representative and advocate, an organization must possess good communication. This is true of both governmental and nonstate actors, be they from the corporate sector or civil society. With media attention serving as a vital source of potential influence and power, numerous associations and groups from the public and private sectors, including not only state departments, corporations, and unions, but also charities, nonprofits, and other nongovernmental organizations (Davis, 2002), have professionalized their communications activities in order to better articulate their interests to key publics and influence policymaking.

The conflict between the sector’s function and its funding (Deacon *et al.*, 1995) suggests, however, that the need for voluntary groups to communicate effectively faces additional challenges beyond simply a restrictive policy environment. First, to obtain the support needed to continue fulfilling their missions, charities,

that spending 45% of its energies and resources on lobbying and media relations is a productive expenditure then it should be free to do so. Similar reasoning has appeared in recent amendments to charity laws in Scotland and, to a lesser extent, the United States (see also IMPACS 2003, pp. 19–20).

<sup>8</sup>A recent CRA policy review amended these limitations on advocacy. Recognizing that these constraints would have a greater negative impact on smaller charities, the CRA upped the amount of money that registered charities with less than \$50K could devote from 10% to 20%, and increased the cap to 15% for those groups with an annual income between \$50K and \$100K. Failure to comply with the CRA guidelines can result in the immediate and permanent revocation of charitable status. According to Revenue Canada, communication by a charitable organization might be seen as political if undertaken “solely to promote a particular point of view.” To be considered “educational” (fully within the purview of legitimate charitable communication), such activity “must be reasonably objective and based on a well-reasoned position . . . a well-reasoned position should present serious arguments and relevant facts.” The ambiguity of terms such as “reasonably” and “should,” and the CRA’s authority to “exercise our discretion and not revoke the registration of smaller charities for the excessive use of their resources on political activities” continues to give those in the voluntary sector cause for concern about how communicative action will be evaluated and judgements meted out.

and nonprofits must generate trust and credibility with the public, their members, and policymakers. Scholarly evidence indicates that while the purpose and function of the voluntary sector continues to receive widespread public support, trust and confidence in charities and nonprofits are somewhat more tenuous (Fenton *et al.*, 1999). In part, this may be due to the 24-h news cycle in which information can be transmitted instantaneously from around the world via news wire services and satellite technology. Widely publicized incidents of alleged wrongdoing by nongovernmental organizations (so-called charity “scandals”) in recent years (for a summary see Gibelman and Gelman, 2001, 2004), while not implicating Canadian organizations to the extent as organizations in the United States (US) or elsewhere, can nevertheless be injurious to the entire sector’s need to continually generate and sustain public trust.

Second, broader changes in the communications environment in which voluntary groups operate suggest that as mainstream news media become increasingly commercialized and profit-focused the opportunities to reach a mass audience without having to pay for access (e.g., through advertising) will likely become more difficult (Deacon, 1996). News media play an indispensable role in public affairs and it has long been argued that their function is to provide accurate information so that citizens can form their own opinions on public policy and make judgements about the performances of their leaders and representatives. Without such information, the argument goes, “the sovereignty of the people will be impaired” (Mills, 2003, p. 27). News media “facilitate the formation of public opinion by providing an independent forum of debate; and they enable the people to shape the conduct of government . . . The media are thus the principal institutions of the public sphere” (Curran, 1991, p. 2). Notwithstanding this “ideal-type” role that news media *should* play in liberal democracies, changes in the complexion of the media industries suggest that the future of a distinct space for the airing of public issues is very much up in the air. Trends toward greater media concentration and convergence continue to create concern among academics and journalists alike (Hackett and Gruneau, 2000; McChesney, 1997; Soroka and Fournier, 2003; Winter, 1997) about both the quality of political news and the ability of nonstate and noncorporate, and particularly resource-poor, groups to access the media and ensure their voices may be heard and understood by the public and policymakers. These market-oriented changes in the political economy of what is an increasingly global media industry, which some argue are driving up the costs of entry and delimiting the plurality of voices that represent the myriad interests of Canadian citizens and communities, most certainly reduces the options available to voluntary groups that wish to communicate their values and interests broadly.

However, these changes have also created new commercial opportunities for voluntary groups to promote their views and services (Deacon *et al.*, 1995). In their survey of the Canadian voluntary sector, Zimmerman and Dart (1998) show that many charities and nonprofit groups are expanding their commercial activities by investing more finances in advertising, marketing, and other promotional ventures

in order to expand their resource base and enhance their symbolic capital. While these new opportunities may at first blush appear to level the playing field, the critical point that needs to be made is that their availability appears to be directly linked to an organization's ability to pay (Deacon, 1996; Deacon *et al.*, 1995; Fenton *et al.*, 1993). The Canadian government's amendment to the Income Tax Act in 2003, which created a sliding scale for spending on advocacy, was designed to alleviate the "hardship" and "negative impact on smaller [organizations]" of the 10% spending rule (Government of Canada, 2003). Nevertheless, despite this very modest policy improvement,<sup>9</sup> voluntary organizations that wish to professionalize their communications will *likely* have to compete with not only one another but also private firms for leadership personnel who possess the necessary experience to succeed in promotional campaigning. Advertising, marketing, and PR campaigns that are designed to generate news publicity normally entail prohibitive costs and the shift to a market-oriented media environment will likely exacerbate rather than alleviate the marginalization of many voluntary organizations from the media and policymaking fields (Fenton *et al.*, 1993).

### **MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES**

Attention to how Canadian news media report on charities and nonprofits is particularly timely given the aforementioned debate about the proper role the voluntary sector should play in policy development and change. More crucially, with mainstream mass media playing a strategic role as a central arena for the construction and crystallization of popular opinion and the articulation and consolidation of policy priorities, the question of which groups receive access and how their views are represented has become a matter of increasing analytical priority. However, as we have indicated above, scholarship on media representations and the communications activities of the voluntary sector is somewhat scarce and varies across national contexts. For example, while we know quite a lot about how news organizations report on the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom (UK), and how British voluntary groups manage their media relations, we know considerably less about the American context and practically nothing at all about the news representation of Canada's voluntary sector. To our knowledge, the only other scholarly work on the media-voluntary sector relationship in Canada is Grossenick's (2004) thesis, which utilizes content analysis to examine how volunteerism is represented in the national and Alberta press.

<sup>9</sup>It remains the case that corporations and business groups, Canada's most vocal and influential advocates on economic policy, receive a business expense deduction for every dollar spent on media advertisements, full-time lobbying, and other related communication expenditures.

### Media and the Voluntary Sector in Britain

The most comprehensive study on the media and voluntary sector to date is a collaborative project that began in the early 1990s at the University of Loughborough's Communication Research Centre (Deacon, 1996; 1999; Deacon *et al.*, 1995; Fenton *et al.*, 1993). Prepared for Britain's Home Office, the research consisted of five overlapping exercises: a pilot study of public attitudes to charities and volunteering; a content analysis of national and local media to ascertain the volume, incidence, and form of media images of charity and volunteering; a postal questionnaire sent to voluntary organizations to learn more about how they organize their fundraising and campaigning, and what role they see the media playing in the furtherance of their aims; a national survey of public attitudes to seek public views about the sector's fundraising and volunteer-seeking activities; and in-depth interviews with key voluntary organization representatives and journalists to inquire about the nature and dynamics of their exchange relationships.

The Loughborough team reached numerous interesting conclusions. It is particularly noteworthy that a clear majority of voluntary groups in their sample reported an increase in their promotional activities over the 5 years preceding the research (approximately 1987–92), and, for those who did, the mainstream press was the most used form of media, with the quality press being a preferred choice over the tabloids. It is also unsurprising that organizations with larger budgets were not only more likely to invest in television publicity, but that many of resource-rich groups had also begun to professionalize their public relations, campaigning, and fundraising work. Indeed, more than one-third of the named charities in the news coverage were identified as among the top 80 fundraising groups nationally (Deacon *et al.*, 1995, p. 125).

Second, the content analysis of voluntary sector news coverage revealed that the highest percentage of sector reportage derived from the proactive communications activities of voluntary groups. This is important because it indicates that while voluntary activity "in its own right is seen by journalists as a legitimate subject of news reporting . . . it also reveals how voluntary agencies have to perform for media attention" (Deacon *et al.*, 1995, p. 128). Looking more closely at the coverage, the research also found that across all media, the most prominent area of voluntary activity reported was health, followed by the environment, and children and animals. By contrast, groups representing ethnic minorities or dealing with issues pertaining to multiculturalism and race relations, poverty, and unemployment received barely a mention or none at all.

Third, the views and opinions expressed by journalists are also noteworthy. Most journalists reported that their contact with voluntary groups had increased in recent years, although when comparing local and national journalists there was a clear distinction in evaluations of the sector's newsworthiness, with the former



seeing charities and nonprofits as possessing considerably more inherent news value than the latter (Deacon, 1999, pp. 61–62). Although many journalists expressed some reservations about the growing professionalism of voluntary sector communications, particularly with respect to the larger charities, they were nevertheless more likely to provide favorable coverage to “those organizations able to draw their attention to issues in an interesting and ‘professional’ way . . . By the same token, organizations who failed to appreciate the pressures and demands of the news-gathering process were spoken of with a thinly-veiled contempt” (Deacon *et al.*, 1995, p. 131).

### Media and the Voluntary Sector in the United States

While there is considerable scholarship in the United States on media representations of social movement and activist organizations (Croteau and Hoynes, 1994; Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991), considerably less is known about the charitable sector broadly and its media coverage and activities specifically. Recently, however, Jacobs and Glass (2002) investigated the organizational resources and characteristics of voluntary groups that appear to be important for obtaining news publicity. Their study thus represents a first big step in the North American literature on news media and the voluntary sector, and (as will be made more evident below) directly informs our own research. Their data are largely exploratory, focusing on 739 groups operating in New York City and upon news coverage from three mass-circulating daily newspapers over an 8-year period (1990–98).<sup>10</sup>

Jacobs and Glass were interested in learning more about what kinds of resources and characteristics can predict whether a voluntary organization will receive media publicity. As with the Loughborough studies, this research reached several interesting conclusions and three are particularly noteworthy. First, the distribution of media publicity was highly skewed, as nearly one-third of the organizations sampled received no publicity at all, whereas only 2% appeared in more than 100 articles each (Jacobs and Glass, 2002, p. 240). According to Jacobs and Glass, “media publicity [is] an incredibly scarce resource” (Jacobs and Glass, 2002, p. 245). Second, while ethnic and social justice organizations received less than average levels of publicity, cultural organizations (e.g., galleries and museums) received more than average levels of media attention. Indeed, association type was strongly correlated with an organization’s probability of receiving news publicity. Controlling for other variables, cultural organizations were significantly more likely to be featured in news coverage than other types of associations. And third, an organization’s resource base was a statistically significant predictor

<sup>10</sup>While the study by Jacobs and Glass (2002) includes a sample of 739 organizations, as a result of missing data, they were only able to analyze 411 of them.

of media attention. As with the Loughborough research, income, paid staff, and membership size all correlated positively with the sector's news publicity, indicating that within the voluntary sector in both the US and the UK, there appears to be a "Premier League" (Deacon, 1996, p. 182) of organizations who are well enough resourced to dominate the news pages and airwaves.

## DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

Taking a methodological cue from Jacobs and Glass, the data for our study identifies the organizational characteristics that appear to be reliable predictors of media publicity. Our sample of 504 nonprofit organizations was generated randomly using the 2003 volume of the Associations Canada Database, which provides a more comprehensive catalogue of voluntary organization information than is available elsewhere. The sampling frame was designed to include as wide a range of voluntary groups as possible: we attempt to compare the media publicity of groups with *and* without registered charitable status, among those operating in each major region of the country (excepting for the Yukon and Northwest Territories), between groups with small, moderate, and large budgets, and those that have international, national, and local scopes of activity. These groups also operate in a variety of subsectors, which we outline in more detail below.

Because our focus is the media attention voluntary organizations receive, the dependent variable is news publicity, which is measured as a total count of news articles for the year 2003 in which the organization's name appears. Using several full-text news databases, we searched all articles published in nine daily newspapers: *Vancouver Sun*, *Regina Leader-Post*, *Toronto Star*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, and *St. John's Telegram*. Articles were counted if they contained the organization's name within the headline or full-text of the story. We included all hard news articles, editorials, opinion columns, and letters-to-the-editor; excluded from the sample are announcements, such as advertisements and obituaries.

The independent variables can be divided into four different categories or groupings: demographic characteristics (age, region); economic resources (annual budget); variables that measure noneconomic resources available to each organization (library and publications); and variables that capture the scope or operational domain of each organization (charitable status, scope of activity, sector/association type). In determining association type, we consulted the summary description of each organization's stated purpose and activities, as outlined in the Associations Canada Database. We also consulted each organization's website (if available), particularly if there was ambiguity or uncertainty. Some organizations straddled more than one sector or area of activity: in these cases a decision was made to assign the organization a dominant "type." To reflect the diversity of voluntary sector activity, the organizations in our sample were catalogued into the

following seven types:

*Social Justice:* Organizations devoted to addressing generalized issues of social concern, such as environmental degradation, homelessness/poverty, animal protection, and human rights (e.g., The Wildlands League, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Amnesty International).

*Cultural/Sport/Leisure:* Organizations engaged in the promotion of fine arts, leisure and recreation, and sport (e.g., Edmonton Symphony Orchestra, Ontario Cycling Association).

*Economic:* Organizations devoted to advancing the financial interests of their constituents and to economic growth more broadly (e.g., Canadian Union of Public Employees, Ontario Chamber of Commerce).

*Professional:* Professional and learned societies (e.g., Canadian Bar Association, Canadian Communication Association).

*Education/Health/Human Services:* Organizations (excluding labor/professional groups) engaged in education and healthcare research and advocacy (e.g., Canadian Cancer Society, Parents for Education).

*Multicultural:* Organizations devoted to the causes of race relations, immigrant/refugee settlement, and ethnocultural education and awareness (e.g., Canadian Race Relations Foundation, Canadian Ethnocultural Council).

*Religious:* Churches, synagogues, mosques, and groups devoted to spiritual and religious causes (e.g., United Church of Canada, Islamic Foundation of Toronto, Canadian Jewish Congress).

Our research is guided by several questions. If the media is to represent a political terrain upon which a cacophony of voices compete for the right to be heard on issues of public importance, which of those voices are more likely to succeed in obtaining the publicity that some argue to be the “oxygen of democracy” (Winter, 1997)? Within the voluntary sector, are organizations with a large economic resource base—which provides the means for hiring a cadre of publicity professionals—more likely to receive media attention? What types of voluntary organizations are most likely to receive the lion’s share of printed space, and is the sector in which an organization operates likely to determine media success independent of its structural resources?

To investigate these questions, we use a regression model to predict the number of media “hits” an organization is likely to receive. Since our dependent variable represents a count, we use a negative binomial model appropriate for count outcomes.<sup>11</sup> The independent variables were entered into the regression models in

<sup>11</sup> Using a conventional OLS regression model for count outcomes can result in inefficient, inconsistent, and biased estimates (Long, 1997, p. 229). The Poisson regression model is the most basic model used in these circumstances, whereby a Poisson distribution determines the probability of a count and the mean of the distribution is a function of the independent variables (for a formal derivation of the Poisson distribution, see Taylor and Karlin, 1994, pp. 252–258). In practice, however, count variables are often overdispersed. That is, they have a variance that is greater than the mean, and while the regression estimates will be consistent they will nevertheless be inefficient. Specifically,

a series of stages, corresponding with their causal impact on the dependent variable (media counts). The first model includes only the two demographic variables (age, region). The second model adds the variables that define the scope and operational domain of the organizations (charitable status, scope of activity, and sector). A third model includes the variables that tap into the noneconomic resources of each organization. The first of these variables is an indicator of whether the organization publishes information that may be used by journalists (e.g., research reports and newsletters). The second variable captures whether the organization has an inhouse library. Finally, the fourth model includes the budget variable, which we use as a proxy measure for the economic resources available to each organization.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

In Table I we provide the descriptive statistics on the organizational characteristics and media publicity of the voluntary organizations in our sample. These results provide information and background for the subsequent statistical analyses.

As can be seen in Table I, the average age of the organizations across all sectors is 39. Nearly two-thirds of all of the organizations included in our sample are located in Ontario. Likewise, approximately 35% of the organizations are charities. The majority of organizations operate at the national (45%) and provincial (29%) levels. While there is some variation across sectors, on average 50% of the organizations we sampled have their own inhouse library, while approximately 88% actually produce their own publications. Finally, Table I also shows that the distribution of organizations across the various budget size categories is relatively uniform.

On the basis of these resources we might think that the voluntary sector should be well positioned to attract adequate representation in the news, yet most of the organizations in the sample did not receive much media attention in 2003; the mean number of media hits is 9, and the median is 1. Thus, there are a few organizations receiving the bulk of media publicity while the rest are receiving very little. However, this distribution of media publicity varies by sector, with economic organizations receiving on average the most attention (mean = 18 articles), followed by cultural/sport/leisure and health/education/human service organizations (mean scores of 13 and 11 articles each, respectively). These results are not surprising for a few reasons: first, economic organizations tend to have a larger financial resource base than other types of voluntary groups, thus diminishing some of the costs normally associated with proactively seeking the attention of news organizations; second, cultural/sport/leisure associations tend to include a relatively more privileged membership and constituency than other organizations (e.g., DiMaggio, 1987, pp. 204–205, as cited in Jacobs and Glass, 2002, p. 242); and third, the restructuring to Canada's postwar welfare state has had an effect of

the standard errors will be biased downward (Long, 1997, p. 230). For this reason, the Poisson regression model rarely fits in practice. To address this limitation, our analysis utilizes the negative binomial regression model, which adjusts for overdispersion.

Table I. Descriptive Results: By Organizational Sector

	Social Justice	Cultural/sport	Economic	Professional	Edu/health	Multicultural	Religious	All sectors
Age	30	42	53	46	28	28	50	39
Region								
Western provinces	16%	13%	13%	19%	23%	29%	22%	19%
Ontario	73%	66%	70%	61%	61%	50%	57%	63%
Quebec	8%	11%	11%	11%	7%	12%	12%	10%
Eastern provinces	4%	10%	6%	9%	10%	10%	8%	8%
Charity								
Yes	53%	47%	7%	7%	46%	44%	49%	35%
No	46%	52%	93%	93%	54%	56%	51%	65%
Scope of Activity								
Local/regional	28%	23%	11%	6%	14%	22%	10%	16%
Provincial	23%	37%	32%	33%	31%	30%	16%	29%
National	33%	33%	52%	60%	46%	37%	51%	45%
International	15%	7%	6%	2%	9%	12%	22%	10%
Library								
Library	49%	35%	48%	32%	50%	78%	79%	50%
No library	51%	65%	52%	68%	50%	22%	21%	50%
Publications								
Publications	80%	84%	85%	93%	92%	92%	96%	88%
No publications	20%	16%	15%	7%	8%	8%	4%	12%
Budget								
\$50,000 and less	14%	29%	7%	21%	15%	31%	30%	20%
\$50,001–\$100,000	12%	9%	2%	15%	8%	10%	12%	10%
\$100,001–\$250,000	18%	20%	22%	15%	19%	23%	4%	17%
\$250,001–\$500,000	18%	11%	22%	18%	12%	21%	16%	17%
\$500,000–\$1.5 mil	16%	13%	19%	14%	15%	10%	12%	14%
\$1,500,000 +	23%	19%	28%	17%	31%	6%	25%	21%
Total Media Hits (mean)	7	13	18	6	11	6	3	9
Total Media Hits (median)	1	2	4	1	2	0	0	1
Total N per category	97	70	54	104	78	52	49	504

Note. Due to rounding, the percentages for some variables may not equal 100.

making health and education among the most critical and contested areas of policy development and change, and thus a subject of considerable public and media scrutiny. These are factors that likely have had an impact on the media coverage of organizations within these sectors. Social justice, multicultural, and professional associations appeared on average in 7, 6, and 6 articles, respectively. Lastly, religious organizations fared the worst with an average of only 3 news reports.

It is clear that while these descriptive statistics reveal some interesting patterns in terms of the organizational attributes and distribution of news publicity across all areas of the voluntary sector, they cannot tell us very much about which kinds of resources are important for achieving media prominence. To do so requires some additional modeling, and the results obtained from these models are provided in Table II.

In the first regression model we can see that, when controlling for region, the relationship between an organization's age and media publicity is just barely statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>12, 13</sup> The coefficient for this variable indicates that an organization's age is positively related to media prominence, i.e., older organizations are more likely to receive media attention than younger ones. When controlling for age, the region variable is not statistically significant.

Model 2 includes the variables that reflect the operational domain of each organization. Surprisingly, the variable used to identify an organization's geographical scope of activity is not statistically significant, i.e., media publicity is not related to whether an organization's activities are focused at the international, national, provincial, regional, or local levels. The estimate for the charity variable, however, is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that charitable organizations are more likely to receive news attention than noncharitable groups. Finally, the variable used to identify organizational sector is also statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The parameter estimates for this variable indicate that economic organizations (the reference category) receive the most media attention, whereas religious organizations receive the least attention. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

The effects of the other independent variables (age and region) on the dependent variable remained stable after adding the organizational characteristic variables to the model.

In Model 3 we add the variables representing the noneconomic resources available to each organization. Somewhat unexpectedly, we did not find a relationship between in-house publications and media attention, i.e., there does not appear to be any significant publicity advantage or disadvantage to organizations that produce their own reports, newsletters, or other published documents. This

<sup>12</sup> Age is included in the model in its original metric. Other transformations of the age variable were tested, but did not significantly improve the fit of the model or the relationship between age and the dependent variable.

<sup>13</sup> The parameters are estimated after using the EMis algorithm to impute values for missing data (see King *et al.*, 2001). Unless otherwise stated, all of the relationships discussed below are to be interpreted as controlling for the other variables in the model.

Table II. Negative Binomial Regression of Media Hits on Organizational Attributes of Canadian Voluntary Groups

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>
Constant	1.99		2.70		2.67		1.36	
Demographic variables								
Age	0.01	0.003*	0.01	0.004*	0.01	0.004*	0.00	0.004
Region								
Western provinces	-0.46	0.247#	-0.46	0.287	-0.49	0.295#	-0.16	0.295
Quebec	-0.11	0.321	0.14	0.349	0.12	0.350	0.01	0.336
Eastern provinces	0.09	0.358	-0.13	0.413	-0.17	0.422	0.18	0.401
Ontario	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Characteristic variables								
Charity								
No	—	—	-0.43	0.218*	-0.44	0.220*	0.01	0.224
Yes	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Scope of activity								
Provincial	—	—	0.40	0.314	0.43	0.327	0.19	0.319
National	—	—	0.20	0.313	0.22	0.319	-0.09	0.320
International	—	—	-0.09	0.385	-0.07	0.391	-0.33	0.399
Local/regional	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sector								
Social justice	—	—	-0.92	0.363*	-0.91	0.364*	-0.52	0.358
Cultural/sport/leisure	—	—	-0.50	0.394	-0.49	0.393	-0.12	0.387
Professional	—	—	-1.13	0.338***	-1.11	0.343***	-0.90	0.334**
Education/health	—	—	-0.61	0.396	-0.58	0.403	-0.37	0.390
Multicultural	—	—	-0.95	0.412*	-0.93	0.421*	-0.67	0.409
Religious	—	—	-1.95	0.429***	-1.91	0.444***	-1.16	0.442**
Economic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Organization resources								
Library	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
No library	—	—	—	—	-0.03	0.198	-0.06	0.197
Library	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Table II. (Continued)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE( <i>b</i> ) <i>p</i>
Publications								
No publications					0.13	0.310	−0.07	0.313
Publications					—	—	—	—
Economic resource								
Budget								***
\$51,000–\$100,000							0.26	0.373
\$100,001–\$250,000							1.33	0.340***
\$250,001–\$500,000							0.78	0.320*
\$500,000–\$1.5 mil							1.30	0.337***
\$1,500,000 +							1.85	0.312***
\$0–\$50,000							—	—
	LI = −1372.29		LI = −1355.56		LI = −1355.46		LI = −1335.95	
	N = 504		N = 504		N = 504		N = 504	
	LR Chi-sq = 7.15		LR Chi-sq = 40.61		LR Chi-sq = 40.80		LR Chi-sq = 79.82	
	P = 0.002		P = 0.0001		P = 0.001		P = 0.0001	
	Pseudo <i>R</i> -sq = 0.01		Pseudo <i>R</i> -sq = 0.02		Pseudo <i>R</i> -sq = 0.02		Pseudo <i>R</i> -sq = 0.03	

Note. # *p* < .1; \* *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, \*\*\* *p* < .001.



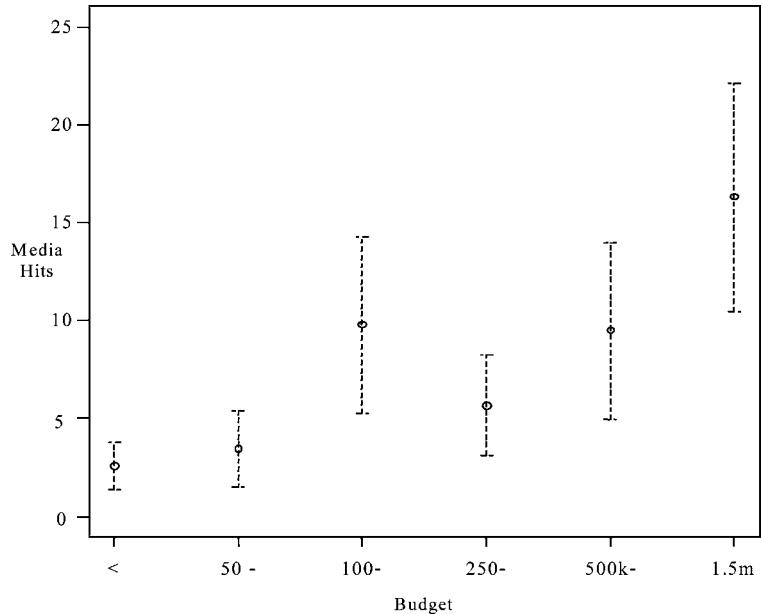


Fig. 1. Media hits by budget size.

does not necessarily mean that creating an information data center is unimportant. Considerable research in mass communication shows that producing one’s own research, press releases, newsletters, and other forms of “organizational writing” can be an invaluable resource and provide the informational architecture needed to produce “information subsidies” (Turk and Franklin, 1987). If the effect of this variable is significant, it may be explained by the presence of other variables in the model. We also found it to be somewhat surprising that organizations that have their own libraries or which hold awareness-raising events do not appear to receive any more (or less) media attention than those that do not. The parameter estimates for the other variables in the model remained the same after including these two variables in the model.

Not surprisingly, the effect of the budget variable, added in Model 4, is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). In order to make the results for the budget variable more meaningful, the coefficients are converted back to the original metric of the dependent variable (media hits), and are plotted in Fig. 1, accompanied by their corresponding 95% confidence bars.<sup>14</sup> As can be seen in the figure there is a large discrepancy in media hits between organizations with large budgets (i.e., >\$1.5 million per year) and organizations with smaller budgets (i.e., <\$100

<sup>14</sup>The coefficients provided in Fig. 1 were simulated using a stochastic simulation technique taken from King *et al.* (2000). The other variables in the model are held constant at their means. See Fox (2002) for information about fitting graphical displays for regression models.

thousand per year). For example, when holding the other variables at their means, organizations with yearly budgets greater than \$1.5 million receive, on average, approximately 17 media hits per year, whereas organizations with yearly budgets of less than \$100 thousand receive, on average, less than 3 media hits per year. The confidence bars in Fig. 1 illustrate that this difference is statistically significant.

Lastly, an interesting finding from the regression analysis is that once the budget variable is included in the model, the majority of the other variables are no longer statistically significant. Of particular interest is that the statistical significance level of the sector variable is reduced from  $p < .001$  to  $p < .05$ . In other words, much of the effect of the sector variable, identified in the previous models, is explained by the varying budget sizes of the organizations within each sector. Moreover, the results of this model also suggest that the economic resources available to organizations may be extremely important in terms of acquiring the attention of mainstream news organizations. Indeed, in many cases a large budget can be used to hire publicity professionals, generate an information data center, and host events designed to attract attention and possibly generate a public presence that have become a central part of strategic organizational planning in an age of advanced consumer capitalism.

## DISCUSSION

Despite the crucial role voluntary organizations play in delivering social services and fostering cohesion, they are nevertheless constrained in terms of the extent to which they can campaign and advocate for improvements in public policy. Moreover, a steady decline in the trust and confidence that Canadians have in their elected officials to meet their needs and promote or defend their interests (whether directly as providers or indirectly as facilitators) seems to be inversely related to the trust and confidence citizens have for charities and nonprofits. Indeed, some theorists have suggested that the nature of politics is changing and civic involvement in the political process is shifting from the formal institutional party and corporatist apparatus to community and other grassroots and/or ad hoc coalitions and voluntary organizations (Beck, 1997). It is not necessarily the case that citizens have become unplugged from the political process: it is just that their engagement in politics is to be found in areas where previously scholars have not taken a close look.

If the role of the voluntary sector is indeed becoming more crucial to late modern forms of governance, it would seem to follow that charities and nonprofit associations should be encouraged to have a strong voice in advocating for policies that represent the interests of their members and constituents. Current government policy in Canada recognizes the importance and value of communications and advocacy to the activities of voluntary organizations, however while charities and

nonprofits that wish to receive tax-exempt status are permitted to buy newspaper ads, organize conferences to support and promote their opinions, hire communication specialists to arrange media campaigns, and use direct mail and other conventional forms of communication (e.g., telethons) to raise funds and awareness, they may do so only if they devote “substantially all” of their resources to fulfilling what are essentially common-law definitions of charitable activity (relief of poverty, advancement of education, advancement of religion, and other purposes beneficial to the community) that are based on an eighteenth century Elizabethan statute about what charitable service should entail. Many within and outside the voluntary sector decry the rule on advocacy as being unnecessarily “archaic” (*Canadian Press*, March 25, 2002) and detrimental to the vitality of Canada’s advanced liberal democracy. As a *Toronto Star* editorial proclaimed, “Canada’s tax laws have excluded charities from meaningful participation in the shaping of public policy. This is not only unfair, it is a needless waste of talent” (March 31, 2002).

Our data indicate that those organizations operating within the economic, cultural/sport/leisure, and education/health and human services subsectors tend to fare much better in the news arena than multicultural, social justice, and religious organizations. The relative invisibility of these latter types of voluntary groups (and specifically multicultural and social justice) from news reporting is especially troubling given that these organizations often advocate on behalf of the most marginalized individuals and groups in society. The continuing retrenchment of the postwar welfare state, and the concomitant growth in the gap between rich and poor, also suggests that these voices are likely to grow in number and that they will require a more open space in which to effectively advocate on behalf of their own interests.

Our research also suggests that despite the importance of communication and media coverage for building capacity within the voluntary sector, news publicity remains essentially a scarce resource for those organizations that wish to contribute actively to policy debate. Over the 1-year period of our sample, the median level of news publicity was only 1 report, and almost 48% of the organizations we examined received no media attention at all. Moreover, our data also show that certain organizational characteristics are related to news publicity, and that some voluntary groups receive a disproportionately large amount of attention from mainstream Canadian news outlets. In particular, media access appears to function primarily as a result of economic resources, a finding underscored by the dominance of the budget variable in our model. This is important for rather obvious reasons: financial resources help to pay for the public relations professionals, information infrastructure, and commercial ventures that an increasingly market-oriented media and public policy environment demands. At the same time, it reinforces a concern discussed earlier that only certain groups (i.e., those with substantial economic resources) will have their voices heard and their ideas listened

to by the public and policymakers. In this regard, news coverage of the voluntary sector in Canada appears to reinforce patterns that exist in the other industrialized democracies to which we refer above.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

The data reported above was gathered during the first stage of a multi-year study into media representations of the voluntary sector in Canada and the communication strategies and media activities of Canadian voluntary groups. While this data provides some interesting insight into the organizational attributes of voluntary groups that appear to be related to receiving news publicity, the type of research we have conducted to date cannot tell us much about the tenor or tone of voluntary sector media coverage. To address this important dimension, the second stage of the research will examine the main themes in voluntary sector news and in doing so will utilize a very different methodological approach from what we have taken here. This will entail exploring the question of whether the bulk of voluntary sector news deals with acts of charitable giving and the provision of social services or substantive issues pertaining to changes in policy. Subsequent stages of the research will also explore the tone of news coverage about voluntary groups—is such reportage generally positive (e.g., narratives of help and hope), negative (e.g., narratives of corruption and fraud), or mixed? Gibelman and Gelman's (2001, 2004) crossnational research suggests that in recent years news reporting on the voluntary sector increasingly concerns itself with telling tales of greed, deceit, and dishonesty, and that this is to the detriment of highlighting the important and positive role that charities and nonprofits play in social welfare provision and the protection of human rights. Although Canadians still report a fairly high level of trust in the voluntary sector (EKOS, 2003), trust is not static but vulnerable to challenge and change over time and must continually be negotiated and constructed. Moreover, our sampling in this study has been restricted to English-language, mass circulating newspapers to the exclusion of French-language, ethnic, and smaller-circulating community newspapers, as well as other media formats such as radio, television, and the Internet. These are all crucial sites of analysis to which attention must be paid. And third, with a view to the production of voluntary sector news, the research will explore the relationship between Canadian voluntary organizations and media professionals. The research will examine whether voluntary activity is considered by journalists in this country to be newsworthy in its own right or whether charities and nonprofits have to perform according to the conventions and codes of mainstream news production? And if they do, what are the publicity strategies of organizations that succeed and what kinds of lessons can be learned for organizations that struggle to get their message across on the news agenda? Also, what are the perceptions and practices of journalists and editors to the voluntary sector? These, after all, are the key intermediaries in the news production process and future research on the

media–voluntary sector relationship will have to explore how editorial decisions are made and what criteria come into play. If other research is anything to go by, journalists will argue that, for good or bad, voluntary groups or charities that want to draw attention to their causes “must be prepared to compete for it” (Deacon *et al.*, 1995, p. 132). This is an empirical question that should and must be explored by future research.

Finally, further sampling would be necessary in order to make reliable inferences from separate regression models for each association type. While it will take time to gather the essential data that are not readably available for many noncharitable nonprofit organizations, such an endeavor would be useful for identifying which characteristics predict news publicity for different types of organizations, especially for the organization types that struggle to obtain media attention.

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